

THE PRIZES OF LIFE

BY EDWARD BRUCE HILL

IN every public contest or competition it is customary to award prizes for excellence. Sometimes these are purely honorary, and to attain them gives no other gratification or benefit than that of satisfied ambition. The Greeks, with that wonderful spiritual feeling which differentiates them from all other men who have preceded or who have followed them, would have no other kind. No peaceful contests have ever equalled the Olympian, Isthmian and Nemean games, but the visitors received no greater material reward than a quickly fading wreath of laurel, olive or parsley. Yet so honored were the contestants that a father whose son died in the contests, an occurrence by no means unknown, received the congratulations and not the condolences of his friends. To have striven even unto death brought honor almost as great as victory could win.

We are not so idealistic. The prize with us (except for purely scholastic honors) must be something of intrinsic value. To be sure, in the case of those who are called amateurs, we forbid prizes of money or the turning of prizes into money, but the prize itself must be a thing of money worth. We bestow upon winners costly articles, sometimes useless, sometimes of some utility, though we do forbid them, even if they cannot use the thing, to turn it by sale into money which they can use. A crown of parsley would be often less embarrassing, but we must see the money in the reward in some form to make it seem to us worth while. In most countries even a friendly game of cards must have some money dependent upon it, though the sum be small. When a contestant is willing to renounce the rank of an amateur money is the usual reward, and whatever in the way of distinction the winner gets is valued chiefly as a means of

getting more money in other contests, or a proof of capacity to do so.

In the greatest contest of all, the contest of life, we have reached substantially the same point. Here we are all professionals; there is no amateur. To be sure, in politics of the higher sort we disapprove of a man's turning his successes into money, except where an important salary is attached to an office, and even then to that extent only; but generally opportunities are open to one highly placed which would not otherwise be his, by which money is to be had without dishonor. We are astonished if one who has held high office dies poor, though we praise him for it.

Nor has it ever been otherwise. We look back, and men have always looked back, to a time when wealth was not all-controlling, but there never was such a time. In ruder periods there were different ways of acquiring wealth, but it was always the wealth which, however acquired and however disguised in its results, was the substance of the prize, and the means and condition, at once, of the winning of what other prize might be desired.

Once the strong man armed might defeat his adversaries in fight and deprive them of their lives, their liberty and their property, but society was very little organized before no one man, however strong and brave, could long hold his position by himself. He must have followers to defend him and fight for him, and to maintain such a band he must have means to provide for their maintenance and pay. At first what we should call a robber chief, he could, for a time, enable his followers to subsist by plunder, but if he aspired higher only wealth could enable him to realize his ambitions. At that point, mental force begins to show a superiority over physical force, and to command it. Jacopo Sforza needed great strength and courage to become a leader of *condottieri*. Francesco Sforza needed only wit and money to become Duke of Milan. The Acciaiuoli were first iron-masters, then bankers, and, when they had amassed wealth, they needed no warlike powers in their own persons to become Dukes of Athens. It is true that incursions of barbarians and uprisings of the poorer classes (who always, did they but realize it, have the power to deprive all winners of all prizes) have sometimes disturbed, for a while, the normal order of things; but in general, and always with the exception, already made, of

scholastic distinction, wealth has been the prize upon which the winning of all other prizes depended.

Society has never greatly troubled itself with the awarding of the prizes, but only with the rules of the game. It has not been a judge or committee of award to determine to whom the prizes should go, but a committee of arrangements to make the rules, or an umpire and referee to enforce them. Very early it determined that physical strength and courage should not count; so long ago that the fighting man who won and kept with his good sword is a dim and shadowy figure to us. Occasionally he has reappeared in a large form, but society, if it could not resist, has condemned him. Constantly he is with us as a robber or a burglar, but society calls him a criminal and punishes him, instead of rewarding him as once it did.

Indeed, it was a favorite theory in the last century that the only business of society was to keep the peace, that is, to see to it that superior physical ability should never win a prize. That done, there were no rules of the game. Any method of winning but by force was to be allowed. Very nearly that policy was followed in many parts of the world, particularly in the United States. For a time the result was not very unsatisfactory, but it has come to be viewed with less favor, and the century was not over when pretty determined efforts to establish other rules began. It was found that, for the mass of people, the suppression of the fighting man had not solved the problem.

The fighting man, as has been said, having made himself the rich man and having thus got a fighting power beyond what his unaided arm could furnish, found means to transmit his wealth to descendants and so to endow them with a force which made their individual power unimportant. When fighting was stopped the fighting man's descendants became merely the rich, and, their wealth being hereditary, come to form, as a class, the nobles. But with the cessation of fighting came the greater and more rapid development of a class which had already begun to exist and had borne no small part in the suppression of violence. This class, for lack of any English word, we call the *bourgeoisie*. Perhaps the nearest English term which would describe them, in this relation, at least, would be to call them the business men.

The bourgeois were engaged in trade, and became richer and richer. The nobles, the descendants of the fighting man, did not

trade, and were now cut off from their ancestral method of obtaining wealth, and did not grow richer; some grew very poor. But the fighting men had organized society with themselves in the saddle, and they sat tight. The business man, conscious of all that makes real power except legal right, grew restive. So came the revolution.

It was the lower classes, the poor, who made the revolution, but it was the bourgeois who directed it. As the fighting man had organized society, so the business man reorganized it. He had long since tied the fighting man's hands so that he could not fight. Now he reduced him completely to the position of anyone else, and then he had a free field and no favor. With force excluded it all became a matter of business, and in such a situation the business man was master. As, when force was allowed, the fighting man alone had a chance to win, so now, when only business is allowed, the business man alone can win. So the event has shown.

The great mass of mankind found themselves in relatively the same state always. Not conspicuously good fighters, they had to submit originally to the fighting man. After centuries of domination by him and his descendants they rose, destroyed the nobles as the nobles had originally subdued them, by force, and thought that they were rid of masters forever. They had done so much that they thought that they had done more, and it took them about a century to begin dimly to recognize that the business man had taken the place of the fighting man and that they still had a master. It was long ago said that the revolution of '89-'93 was a bourgeois revolution and that there must be, and some day will be, a revolution of the people.

The new masters took some time to get settled in their seats. They were not so very masterful at first. It took time to give them full control. So the first fighting men to acquire a fixed status had not been very oppressive. The protection given by them had been more beneficial than their rule had been harmful. Then, for a good while, business men arose from among the people and forced their way among the new ruling class. So fighting men had done when the old nobility was forming. Furthermore, the new rule was milder than the old. It is a horrid act to ride down a man and slash him with a sword, and everybody will cry out at you. Let the man die quietly in a corner of

starvation and few will notice it; still fewer will think of connecting you with his death. But the business man is punching, and works more quickly and methodically than the fighting man, and not a century passed before men began to feel the heaviness of his weight and dimly to become conscious that he needed some curbing as well as the fighting man. Hence, in this country, anti-trust laws and similar restrictive legislation, and in many countries heavy death duties.

Undoubtedly envy is at the bottom of much of the feeling which exists, but envy in such matters is not an ill feeling. If it leads, as it often does, to ambitious emulation, no one would consider it harmful; if it leads to an appreciation of evils in the social organization which might otherwise go unnoticed, it produces good. Only where it is a barren feeling of hatred with no other fruit than a desire to injure is it an evil feeling, and in that naked form it rarely has force enough to be important.

While the question is not important for our present purpose, it ought to be noted that there is a danger in the great and growing power of the business man which is real. Apart from the peril which the constantly increasing inequality of wealth constitutes to our institutions and even to the continuance of government at all, there is another spectre which may not be so unsubstantial as has been thought. Many people see Standard Oil in everything as regularly as some excited Protestants see the Catholic Church. Foolish as these ideas are, there can be no doubt that we are moving toward a concentration of production, transportation and distribution in fewer hands than would have seemed possible a few years ago. The process is progressive because it is natural. It benefits the owners in every way. Unless some unforeseen obstacle arises, it should not be many years before a group of men may meet around a single table who control everything of that sort in the United States, nor can such a group exist long before one man dominates them and our destinies. Against such a prospect our anti-trust laws are like Dame Partington's broom against the Atlantic, for he must be blind indeed who does not see that we are in the presence of a great natural law, and that the attempt to restore competition is as futile as would be an attempt to restore stage-coaches or canal boats as a means of travel against the competition of modern railways.

But taking conditions as they actually exist and have long existed, the prizes of life go, not according to abstract merit of any sort, not to intellectual capacity generally, not at all to the morally deserving, but simply and solely to the business men in the order of their business capacity. The distribution of these prizes has always been a subject of discussion and anxiety. It has always been felt that the system of award, whatever it happened to be at the time, was imperfect. The situation today is no better than it ever was. We have changed the beneficiaries and adopted a new principle of distribution, but we have not met the difficulty. We have eliminated the soldier and the noble, but we are no nearer an ideal system by substituting the business man and the rich man's children.

What, then, are the prizes of life? They may be summed up in two words: wealth and power. Reputation, honorary distinction, is also a prize, but constantly tends to a lower grade, if it be not combined with one of the other two. The others are more or less correlative. He who has power can easily acquire wealth, he who has wealth has the potentiality, at least, of power. Among the general run of politicians it is well understood that they seek power chiefly as a means of acquiring wealth, and it is well known that to reach a certain degree of power they must, if they have not wealth themselves, be able to command it. On the other hand, those who are possessed of wealth are able to control officials, politicians and elections.

Undoubtedly there are men on whom honorary distinction exercises a greater attraction than either wealth or power, but so there are persons upon whom literary or scientific pursuits exercise a like attraction, even though no great distinction be attained. None of these is important to our purpose. Society is not affected by them. They do not influence it. The lives of others are not modified by what they do. These things, however we may exalt them, and profess to admire them, are not for most men the real prizes of life. To the majority there is one chief prize: wealth. That seems to be, though it is not, within the reach of all; that, if attained, will give power to a corresponding extent, so far as its possessors desire it; that may easily be made to bring honorary distinction as well. For most, wealth is not only one of the prizes, it is *the* prize, of life.

Nor, as has been seen, is this judgment unfair. Indeed, it has

probably never been so. We can hardly conceive of an organization of society in which wealth could not bring everything which men prize except happiness, and if wealth cannot ensure happiness the absence of wealth may, at least, prevent it. Wealth, to at least a moderate amount, may be and is usually the condition of happiness, even though it cannot of itself create it. Everything else it can give, and unhappiness it can at least alleviate. Consider the various causes of unhappiness: bereavement, sickness, disgrace, the enmity of others, the failure of ambition, and to each add poverty. None can reasonably, or will, question that the addition deepens immeasurably what is, in itself, so distressing. Give wealth, and none can deny the alleviation, insensible as it may be to the rich who suffer.

Now if we were to award this prize upon abstract principle and as if it were the real prize in a formal contest, how should we proceed?

In the first place we should, no doubt, prefer those who by their services to mankind have deserved reward. This would include many who do win the prize, the inventors, the developers of new regions and new resources, those who have helped supply the necessities of life, those who have discovered new sources of supply, those who have facilitated interchange of goods, those who have promoted manufacturers, and thus at once made the product accessible to those who need it and give employment to those who make it.

As at present organized, society does give these the prize, but upon an irrelevant condition; that they also be good business men. If they be not, the inventor shall wear his life out in poverty and find his only reward in empty posthumous fame; the developer of new regions and resources shall find them snatched from him when he has once shown their value; the maker of transportation and establisher of manufactures shall see his facilities working for another who was, perhaps, incapable of originating them, and the streams of wealth which they pour forth flowing in channels from access to which he is barred.

Not so would an impartial judge of the contest award the prize. He would consider only what concerns mankind, that is, the degree of benefit which the particular man has conferred upon them, and would nicely apportion the award accordingly. He would consider all dishonesty, oppression, manipulation of securi-

ties, trading upon the necessities of the public and similar acts as disqualifying the competitors, and would exclude those who so acted.

We, on the contrary, make such things titles to larger rewards. The greatest fortunes are, in fact, founded upon and created by them. We vainly strive by laws to prevent them, but our efforts are futile. To use a common phrase, "that is business", and when it has succeeded and great wealth has been accumulated we submit perforce, for only revolution could mend the matter, and that remedy we feel to be worse than any disease.

But even apart from what are considered illegitimate practises, our present system takes not the least account of benefit to the community. Men die in poverty who have conferred immeasurable benefits upon us. The holders of our greatest fortunes have conferred substantially none. Excluding all questions of improper conduct, there can be no doubt that services to the public is not even an element in the case. The good business man does not, as a rule, antagonize the public needlessly, but neither does he serve it. It is by doing business that he reaps his reward, and service to man, if it appear at all, is wholly incidental.

In the next place, we should award prizes to men of letters and of science, to scholars, poets, philosophers, artists of every sort, to all those who have benefited us in ways which have no material result. We should still pursue our purpose of regarding service to mankind as the achievement for which the prize is awarded, and the extent of that service as measuring the reward. It is just to prefer in the distribution of material rewards those who have produced what we distribute, but it may be that some others should be thought to deserve almost as highly.

Statesmen, soldiers, legislators, judges and (let us not use the word "philanthropists") those who have helped to make life better, happier and easier, would also have their prizes. We can hardly say now where each should stand nor to what prize the men of all these categories should be entitled, but surely they must all be included.

Then would be considered they who, with their hands and their heads, in humbler rank perhaps than those already named, aid in the creation of wealth and in upholding our social organization. To each according to his desert his individual prize.

Ethical considerations we should exclude as such. We should look at the question in a broad social way. The community produces wealth; that wealth is to be distributed among its members, having regard to an ideal distribution in accordance with the benefit which the country receives. We are not considering him, whatever his virtues, from whom the community receives substantially nothing, not the moral demerit (if it so be) of one from whom the community receives much. It is only a just and fair distribution of a common fund at which we aim.

The business man, then, to whom we award everything now, (for no one gains a prize at all unless he be a good business man) figures in such a plan in a very low place, next to the worker with his hands, unless he have incidentally some other claim. No matter how successful he may be, the public is not usually interested in or benefited by what he does. The late A. T. Stewart, for example, while he made a large fortune for himself and, we may assume, by unobjectionable methods, did not in the process really benefit the community at all.

Of course all this is purely speculative. No one would think of any such system of awards, nor can it be conceived as anything possible in practice, were it within reasonable contemplation as a theory. Even as a speculation there would be no agreement, probably, as to the relative position to be assigned to different classes of persons. But it serves to bring out one thing which can hardly cause much difference of opinion, and this is that no interest of society requires or justifies a system by which the man of business, purely as such, monopolizes the richest prizes of life.

Now it is to be borne in mind that our social organization is purely conventional. There is not a right of any man which is not, in a sense, artificial. He has these rights because society is so organized as to secure them to him, and with a different organization his rights would be quite different; under other organizations they have been quite different; they differ, even radically, in different places today.

We are, therefore, dealing with nothing primordial. All rights and rules would disappear if our present social frame were dissolved. If, then, we find that any rule works ill, we are quite at liberty to change it. Once we changed the rules when we deprived the fighting man of the power to enrich himself

by main force. Society (for, whatever the form of government, only society as a whole can really make these changes) became convinced that the old order was intolerable and abrogated it. Society has become restive under the rule of the business man. Various laws have been passed in the attempt to restrict his powers and modify the results of their exercises. Thus far they have been largely ineffective, but it may be that measures can be found as effective as those that made the fighting man helpless and destroyed the privileges of the nobles. There is a peculiar difficulty from the fact that the present ruler of society is not sharply differentiated from the rest of mankind as were the fighting man and the noble. Laws could be passed to affect the latter alone; it is difficult to frame laws to affect the former which will not affect and include others who need no restraint.

But no natural rights are violated by the attempt, nor will be violated if the attempt succeed. So far as the efforts have gone, there has been much complaint from those affected that they are denied the rights of other citizens and are singled out for oppressive legislation. That may be and may properly be. If the usual laws do not act upon a man because of his exceptional situation, in the same way as they do upon others; if, while nominally the same for all, they have the effect of giving him special privileges or powers, then they ought to be changed, and laws affecting him especially ought to be made. Sane legislation takes account of facts, and is not led astray by theories or phrases. No one is to be persecuted, but no one is to be favored because laws, in appearance equal, become by circumstances unequal as to him.

It may be that the problem is, at present, insoluble. It may be that nothing short of a complete reconstruction of our social fabrics will suffice. Yet it surely deserves the deepest study, the most anxious thought, the most earnest effort, to find some way by which it shall be possible to avoid giving to the possessors of one particular kind of mental ability, and that not a kind of great value to the community, all the prizes of life.